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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001857

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PHUM MO PREL](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO BERBERS: A PLEA FOR INTERNATIONAL  
ENGAGEMENT

REF: RABAT 1394

Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Berber (Amazight) activists want greater recognition and clout, a majority of Morocco's population Berbers are among its poorest citizens although there has been an expansion of Berber cultural rights, including in schools and media. Growing frustration among Berber youth may lead to violence. Activists seek "Berberization" of the system to reverse centuries of Arab "cultural genocide. More radical elements, however, call for a Pan-North African Berber Republic. The Government of Morocco (GOM) recently outlawed the only registered Amazight party on constitutional grounds two and a half years after it was formed. Activists pleaded for USG support for their movement, arguing that it would counter-balance, violent "Arab" Salafism. End summary.

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Pan Berberism or Anti-Arabism?  
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¶2. (C) Lahcen Oulhaj Dean of the School of Law, Economics, and Social Sciences at Mohammed V University, is a close friend and former college classmate of the king. Despite his impeccable establishment credentials, Oulhaj is a rabid Berber nationalist. He, and several other Berber interlocutors, envision a Berber republic, freed from "Arabic influence," stretching across North Africa from Egypt's western borders to the Canary Islands. Kamel Said, a leader in the International Amazight Congress (IAC), and international Berber umbrella group, said that the IAC is working to improve links and create a coordinated strategy for self determination among Berber movements in different countries.

¶3. (C) Oulhaj stressed the need to separate North Africa from Arabs who &oppose civilization.<sup>8</sup> He argued that at the beginning of the twentieth century, in order to counter the influence of the Ottoman Empire, the British and the French helped foster Arab nationalism. Oulhaj pleaded for the U.S. to help develop Berber nationalism in order to counter "Arab-rooted" extremist threats in the world. He concluded, &We need to weaken the Arabs. We are not Arabs, but have been convinced that we are. We need to rediscover our history.<sup>8</sup>

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"Closer to Washington than Riyadh"

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14. (C) Several Berber (Amazight) activists separately told us that they see a firm distinction between Amazight and Arab culture, saying that they are a potential ally of the USG. Canadian trained mathematics professor Mohammed Oudadess concurred, saying that the U.S. should not assume that the Amazight movement is guided by the same anti-Western philosophy as pan-Arabism or political Islam. "We are closer, philosophically and geographically, to Washington, than we are to Riyadh and Teheran. We are your natural allies" he said.

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Peaceful Now, but Extremism a Danger

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15. (C) A variety of interlocutors spoke of their worry over what they saw as growing anger among Amazight youth. Although generally and historically a movement of moderation, they said that frustration and impatience among Berber youth was growing - and crossing borders. They encouraged the USG to engage on Amazight issues and with the Amazight community across North Africa to head off any potential drifts towards extremism, violence, or a the creation of a "gradual network of uprising" between countries with large Berber populations. Kamel Said pointed to clashes in early 2007 between Berber students and "Arabists" in universities around the country, saying that unless a political release valve is found, discontent will spill "out of campuses and onto streets." He expressed a desire to avoid the type of wide-spread Berber riots Algeria experienced in 2001 in the Kabiliye region.

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A Majority Living as a Minority

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16. (U) Berbers account for between 60 and 90 percent of Morocco's population of 35 million (depending on sources) and between 35 and 50 percent of Moroccans are believed to speak some form of Tamazight (Berber) as a mother tongue. Although they are represented in the upper levels of academic, financial and political structures (and the King is half Berber), Berber territory, centered in the central mountain ranges and desert fringes, is among the poorest and least developed in Morocco. Rates of illiteracy in Berber communities sometimes reach as high as 50 percent, and levels among Berber women top 60 percent in some areas. Many students who grow up speaking Berber as their native tongue drop out of school when introduced to Arabic curricula and Arabic speaking teachers.

17. (C) The activists explained that after independence, the Moroccan government consolidated power by stressing the unity of Arabic heritage, while King Hassan II pursued a policy designed to keep the countryside poor, uneducated and docile. The mostly rural Berbers found no place in this new order. This has fueled a consistent theme of disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction with Arabization and the existing Moroccan power structure within the Berber movement. Mohammed Oudadess told of his brother's year-long struggle to get his daughter's Berber name approved by Moroccan authorities in 2003. "This is a small thing," he said, "but it means we are not at home in our own country."

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Political Berberism

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18. (C) On November 25, the Ministry of Interior issued a statement declaring the Amazight Democratic Party (ADP), as an ethnically based party, constitutionally illegal. The Ministry of Justice then filed a legal request to void the

ADP's registration. This led to a series of protests outside of Parliament. The ADP appealed and the case, originally slated for December 13, was delayed until January 17. During a late night meeting on December 9 with ADP President Ahmed Adghirni and activist Said Bajji, they told poloff that said that the movement is all inclusive and does not restrict membership to Berbers. Adghirni said that he hoped to improve ties with the diplomatic community and warned poloff against believing "propaganda" which paints Berbers as separatists. He said that Berbers form the majority of the population in Morocco, "so what would we separate from?"

¶9. (C) During an earlier October 20 conference in Meknes activists told emboffs they are trying to build an alternative Amazight political party in the next two years. They produced two programmatic documents (which they gave to poloff) over an 18 month consultation process that will form their party's platform. Fundamental tenets include regional economic autonomy and a constitutional amendment making Berber an official language on par with Arabic and French. They admitted, however, to a disconnection between the Berber political intelligentsia and the vast majority of Amazight living in poverty in the mountain regions.

¶10. (SBU) Mohammed Oudadess felt that the Mouvement Populaire (MP), was as corrupt and ineffective as the other parties. The MP, which targeted Berber voters in main stream Berber-associated elections did not do as well as expected, although it is the third largest party and ended up in the opposition. He complained that it would only serve to siphon votes from true Amazight candidates in future elections. Kamel Said added that the MP was a palace creature. Mohammed Ajaaja said that low Amazight turnout in the September elections was due to a deliberate boycott, not simple disenchantment. &If we had participated we would have validated a broken system,8 he scoffed. The ADP chose not to campaign and publicly called for an Amazight boycott. (Note: Despite such calls, participation rates in some Berber areas were higher than elsewhere. End note.)

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Religion, Culture, and Education  
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¶11. (C) On the subject of religion, Oudadess noted that, although most Amazight in Morocco are Muslim, it is not out

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of deep belief. Dr. Yousef Agouri, an Amazight activist and neurosurgeon from Meknes, told poloff that Moroccans are Muslim by law, not choice, and that if Berbers had the liberty to decide, they might not choose to remain so. He said that originally, the Amazight were spiritualists and animists who counted significant numbers of Jews and Christians among their population before the Arabization of Morocco. Former USFP politician and editor of the now defunct Berber language review "Tifawit" Mohammed Ajaaja said that he is Amazight first, and that religion is secondary.

¶12. (C) All Berber interlocutors emphasized their belief that the "Arabization" of Morocco amounted to a continuing cultural genocide. Agouri, complained that despite the government's expanding program to teach Tamazight in primary schools, there was no formal mechanism for mainstreaming native Tamazight speakers into the broader school system.

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A Desire for Media Access  
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¶13. (SBU) There are three Amazight newspapers but, Mohammed Oudadess said, as a result of their refusal to accept government financial support (and because a large portion of the Amazight population is illiterate), they have not been able to flourish. Irhaz Mimoun, an engineer, former USFP politician and Berber activist, griped about a lack of access

to media. He pointed out that despite widely publicizing the October 20 conference through press releases and phone calls, not a single representative of the non-Amazight media attended. Oudadess encouraged the Voice of America and the USG to produce programs and public affairs materials in Tamazight.

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Next Steps  
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¶14. (SBU) Activists requested USG assistance in creating a literacy program focused on Berber areas. The IAC would like to organize an informational meeting on Amazight issues in New York or Washington for U.S. legislators and other policy-makers. They are in touch with Amazight leaders in Algeria, Libya, Tunis, and Mauritania.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) While "political Berberism" is not yet an influential force, its intellectual leaders are savvy and appear to coordinate their message. Our interlocutors were from the upper levels of Moroccan economic and political society, and thus were not representative of the vast majority of the Berber populace. They were remarkable, however, for their blunt, even radical, rejection of the existing order in favor of a "Berberized" Morocco. It is not clear, however, whether their pointed comments over growing anger among Berber youth was designed to appeal to USG concerns over instability or reflected actual ground truth. We do believe, that Berber issues will become increasingly visible despite GOM concessions on education and media. End comment.

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